

Non-disclosure of donations to partisan campaigns
poses a corruption risk in The Gambia
By: Michael Davies, Public-Private Integrity publication 2023

Once again, Gambia is voting without party politicians being asked to reveal their campaign fundraising sources. The lack of an ethical code for campaign contributions to political parties should not be taken as a license for the Gambia's Independent Electoral Commission not to impose various restrictions and insistence on transparency requirements for political party funding. This is a failure in the electoral bodies' efforts to curb corruption and other categories of undue influence that campaign donors may seek to exercise over elected officials.

Unlike many other jurisdictions, participants of political parties seeking senior appointments in The Gambia are rarely involved in hotly contested political campaigns within the parties, but these political campaigns are usually funded by group and individual donors who may have vested interest.

In The Gambia, the funding of political parties is not checked to determine whether a donation or financial contribution poses a risk of corruption to the system of governance. The IEC lacks the expert analysis to confirm whether donations to political parties meet a specific ethical condition or the money raised is likely to pose a risk of corruption, and if so, how it can be justified to minimize or eliminate the risk of illegal activity. The electoral body's failure to carefully screen donations to political parties drives campaign donors to trick elected officials into encouraging conflicts of interest that are so pervasive in government procurement.

Even as the country prepares for local government elections, the country's laws governing political campaign donations are not updated, leaving significant loopholes that raise questions about the integrity of officials elected to conduct government affairs in The Gambia.

Members of political parties aspiring to leadership positions (including president, mayors etc.) must continue to publicly disclose their sources of campaign funding in order to serve with integrity, despite the lack of integrity legislation. Local anti-corruption practitioners continue to hope that a new electoral law will be passed during the next legislature to underscore the importance of disclosing campaign finance by political parties.

Meanwhile, millions of Dalasi poured steadily into every campaign by politicians in The Gambia seeking elected positions in public office. However, potential door openers for corruption and insider trading are not regulated by codes of ethics, which further increases the risk of corruption in elections and thus also in governance.

The local government election campaign of the parties is just around the corner. It is not known how many millions could flow into the campaigns, but several million Dalasi are expected to be donated out of legitimate interest, as we have seen at the recently concluded national party congresses, where certain individuals in return for their generosity to the Party finances received significant party leadership nominations. It must first be clarified where the disgraceful campaign donations of the parties came from or whether they personally benefited from donations before the election of party leaders. This secrecy of these and similar donations poses serious corruption risks to The Gambia's governance architecture.

More recently, however, attempts by the electoral commission to introduce a code of conduct that

could have banned a political party from opposing disclosure of party campaigns funding during the 2021 presidential election have failed. The fact is, however, that the issue of integrity in governance is a prime indication that something like keeping political party fundraising campaigns secret deprives Gambians of their legitimate right to information that would help them make informed political decisions when they exercise the constitutional right to vote in all elections in the country.

If The Gambia is considering a new election law, it should emphasize a strict code of ethics to uphold guiding principles to bring the disclosure requirements for campaign contributions from political parties as close as possible to the requirements currently required by the current election law, in addition to publishing audited accounts on an annual basis of the political parties. The application of transparency principles suggests that a new national electoral law should be amended to enforce core demands for free, fair and transparent elections that hold political parties to account. Wasalam.

